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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/EX AND AF/E

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/26/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: ERITREAN DEFENSE MINISTER ON U.S.-ERITREAN  
RELATIONS

REF: WHITE HOUSE 162222Z JUN 09

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (S) Major General Sebhat Efrem, Eritrea's popular minister of defense, warmly greeted the ambassador on the margins of an Italian defense attache function June 25. He was aware of the letter from President Obama to President Isaias (ref) and said he seemed pleased at the prospect of improved relations.

When the ambassador went on to describe how the embassy has been trying for three days to get a call through from Secretary Clinton to President Isaias, Defense Minister Sebhat looked unpleasantly surprised, even crestfallen. "Perhaps the president has been traveling," he offered.

¶2. (S) The ambassador said there was a window for a more open and normal relationship, but Eritrea's action in Somalia was an obstacle. When the ambassador said the window for improved relations would not remain open indefinitely, the defense minister grabbed the ambassador's arm and said, "Keep pushing! Keep pushing!"

¶3. (S) Defense Minister Sebhat then hiked up the sleeve of his jacket and shirt to reveal that he was wearing a silver and gold United States Marine Corps wrist watch. "My old DAO friend Chris gave me this watch," Sebhat confided. The defense minister had earlier reminisced fondly of his student days, when his math and science classes had been tutored by GI's from Kagnev Station. In early 2009 a senior Eritrean opposition figure advised us to "keep on good terms with Defense Minister Sebhat."

MCMULLEN